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THE LEGENDARY AND MYTH-MAKING PROCESS IN
HISTORIES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By SYDNEY G. FISHER

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BY SYDNEY G. FISHER.

(Read April 18, 1912.)

Having taken the trouble some years ago to examine the great mass of original evidence relating to the American Revolution, the contemporary documents, pamphlets, letters, memoirs, diaries, the debates in parliament and the evidence obtained by its committees, I found that very little use of it had been made in writing our standard histories, works like those of Bancroft, Hildreth, Fiske, which have been the general guides and from which school books and other compilations, as well as public orations, are prepared.

Others have made the same discovery and have been overwhelmed with the same astonishment. About fifteen years ago Mr. Charles Kendall Adams, astonished at what he found in the original evidence, wrote an article on the subject published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Vol. 82, page 174), ridiculing the standard histories for having abandoned the actualities and the original evidence. Our whole conception of the Revolution, he said, would have to be altered and the history of it rewritten. Within the last year or two Mr. Charles Francis Adams has made the same discovery and in his recent volume "Studies Military and Diplomatic" has attacked the historians with even greater severity and rewritten in his usual

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trenchant, luminous and captivating style, a considerable portion of that history. His essays on the military strategy of the Revolution are contributions of permanent value, refreshing and ennobling, because they substitute truth and actuality for the mawkish sentimentality and nonsense with which we have been so long nauseated.

Minor investigations like recent works on the Loyalists by Flick, Van Tyne, Ryerson and Stark, also Bartlett's "Destruction of the Gaspee," Judge Horace Gray's essay on the "Writs of Assistance," publications like the Hutchinson Letters, the Clinton-Cornwallis Controversy, have of course helped to bring about this change. The general improvement in public libraries, in accessibility to the old pamphlets and original evidence of all sorts, has also helped and led to a desire for knowledge of the actual events. Lapse of time, too, is no doubt having its effect in lessening the supposed inadvisability of letting all about the Revolution be known.

Within the last two years in writing a life of Daniel Webster I had occasion to examine the original evidence of our history from the War of 1812 to the Compromise of 1850; and I found that it had substantially all been used in our histories of that period. There was no ignoring of it or concealment of it such as I had found when I investigated the original evidence of the Revolution. It is strange at first sight, that the history of our Civil War of 1861 should have all its phases so openly and thoroughly exhibited, the side of the South as well as the side of the North, both fully displayed to the public, and that the greater part of the evidence of the Revolution should be concealed. But the circumstances of the Revolution were quite different.

In the first place, the large loyalist party in this country in some places a majority, were so completely defeated, hunted down, terrorized, driven out of the country and scattered in Canada and various British possessions, that to use a vulgarism they never "opened their heads" again. It is only in recent times that any one has had the face to collect their evidence and arguments from the original sources and publish it. For more than half a century after the Revolution no writer could gain anything but condemnation and contempt for mentioning anything about them. The suc-

Gift
J. D. Thompson
D. 1877

cessful party in America would not even vilify them, but ignored them and their doings as if they had had no existence. The object of this was to make it appear that the Revolution had been a great spontaneous uprising of the whole American people without faction or disagreement among themselves. In England, strangely enough, the loyalists were also ignored and nothing said about them. They were often suspected of being half rebels, "whitewashed rebels" as they were sometimes called. Those who fled to England were apt to be treated with more or less contempt. They were often regarded as mere objects of charity, "lick pennies" as one of them complained, or at best as mere provincials of neither social nor political importance.

But at the close of our Civil War, the people of the Southern States remained in the country, were respected by the North as well as by the rest of the world, published their side of the controversy and again sent their representatives to Congress as they had done before the war. No one has as yet dared to falsify or conceal the facts of that history or turn it into myths and legends.

In the second place, after the close of the Revolution, we were for a long time a very disunited country. It was very doubtful whether the States would be able to come together and form a national government. Many thought that some of them might go back under British control. When a national constitution was at last adopted, it was regarded by the rest of the world and even by ourselves, as an experiment which very likely might not in the end succeed. In Europe, it was largely regarded as a ridiculous experiment. Our democratic ideas and manners were despised and our newness and crudeness contrasted with the settled comfort and refinement of the old nations. We felt all this keenly. Our writers and able men struggled might and main to unite our people and build up a nation. They strove to give dignity and respect to everything; to make no damaging admissions, to let not the smallest fact creep out, that might be taken advantage of. It was, therefore, perhaps too much to expect that they would describe the factions and turmoil of the Revolution as they really were, the military absurdity of the British General Howe letting it go by default, the cruelty and perse-

cution inflicted on the loyalists and their large numbers. So they described a Revolution that never happened and never could happen. A whoop and hurrah boys! All spontaneous, all united: merciful noble, perfect; all virtue and grand ideas on one side, all vice, wickedness, effeteness and degeneration on the other.

That feeling, the boasting and the exaggeration were proper enough in one sense. It was certainly right to strive to build up the nation, and protect and dignify it. But one of the most curious instances of the way the feeling worked was Jared Sparks' edition of the letters of Washington. Sparks was the President of Harvard College, a man of intellect and learning, the author of an interesting collection of biographies of American worthies. He felt that he must exalt Washington, and so he rewrote quite a number of the Washington letters, struck out such expressions as such and such a thing would "not amount to a flea bite," altered some statements about religion and God, left out whole passages, especially those in which Washington told of cashiering officers for cowardice. Sparks was an interesting instance of the myth-making process used for pious purposes, for by magnifying Washington in this way he, no doubt, sincerely believed that he was helping religion and the youth of the country by setting up an example of perfection. Even Washington Irving, as Mr. Adams points out ("Studies Military and Diplomatic," pp. 166-168), was not a little inclined to myth-making. Irving gave us some excellent historical work, for which we should be grateful; but he could not altogether escape the taint of his time.

Jared Sparks was unquestionably a man of integrity but he was carried away by the feeling of making a good showing by manufacturing Washington into theoretical perfection. I do not suppose that he for one moment realized that he was doing what very closely resembled some things for which persons in lower walks of life are sent to jail. He had a rude awakening when W. B. Reed discovered the whole imposture and published the original letters with the Sparks improvements side by side. But the exposure did little good; for similar methods, and evidence-ignoring on a much larger scale, were used through whole volumes of so-called history.

It is interesting in this connection to remember that Charles Thomson, the Secretary of the Continental Congress during the Revolution, wrote a history of that event; and his position and acquaintance with leading characters must certainly have given him valuable information. But he burnt the manuscript, giving as a reason that its publication would give too much offense to persons still living. He wished to quiet down everything, forget the horrible scenes, controversies and factions, and build up the country. Certainly a most laudable motive; but we must not now in these days be misled by it and accept as history all those standard volumes which when analyzed are nothing but concealment of actual facts for the sake of helping the nation.

We must hasten, however, to the third cause of the trouble, and that was that the first history of the Revolution which all the others have followed and copied was an English whig partisan argument.

The English whig party were in a peculiar position during the Revolution, with a rebellion on hand that seemed likely to rend the British empire asunder. They were in a very small minority, overwhelmingly outvoted on every subject. They adopted as their policy for the American War, the principle, or rather supposition, that if the troops were all withdrawn from the colonies and no attempt made to coerce them, the Americans would voluntarily submit to be ruled by England and form an ideal spectacle of uncoerced colonies willingly and gladly remaining under the tutelage of their mother.

It was a beautiful ideal as developed by the great whig orators, Burke, Chatham and Barré, illustrated from history and art, and dignified by passionate appeals to sentiment and manhood. Their speeches have become classics of the English language and have been recited for a hundred years by our school boys. Those orations with others by the lesser whig lights to be found in the parliamentary debates, together with the whole whig policy, were, of course, very acceptable to our people. The whigs were continually asserting that our people did not want independence; they besought mild and conciliatory measures for us; they attacked the tory measures; and so far as they succeeded in checking in this way the tory policy of coercion, they aided us in obtaining independence.

This history of the Revolution from the whig point of view was written almost as rapidly as the events occurred, not only in the whig speeches, but in the *Annual Register*, an important publication of that time, still in existence, which summed up the political and diplomatic occurrences of the year both at home and abroad as they affected England. After the Revolution was ended and people began to think of writing an account of it, they found that it was the easiest thing in the world to do. Just get down the volumes of the *Annual Register* and there it all was for each of the seventeen years of the long controversy; each year by itself clearly and co-gently written; for the *Annual Register* had employed the great whig orator Edmund Burke to write these summaries every year. Burke was very careful with his dates, facts and statements so far as he chose to go and the *Register* enjoyed a high reputation in that respect. But the statements were all whig statements; no others were admitted; no facts unfavorable to the whig line of policy were admitted; and every fact and statement was given the tinge and leaning of the whig policy.

Those summaries running for seventeen years in the *Register* and the speeches of the whig orators were the material that the early historians of the Revolution used. Gordon, who wrote the first important and widely read history of the Revolution, copied page after page of the *Register* verbatim and says so in his preface to the first English edition. Those whig speeches and summaries gave the tone, the point of view and the limitations, and fixed them so rigidly that the great mass of evidence outside of those limitations has always been rejected; and when now obtruded on the public in even the mildest form, is received with staring and sometimes indignant incredulity.

I am certainly very glad that the whigs adopted the line of policy that has been described. It was a great help to our cause; and it may have been good for the whig party or at any rate the best they could do under the circumstances. But to make that mere partisan position the basis and limitation for writing history is the rankest absurdity that was ever heard of. Even as a political policy, the whig plan was a mere dream that could never be carried out in

practice. It was a legal and political impossibility and contrary to common sense. There was no such thing, there never was and there never will be such a thing as a community of Americans voluntarily submitting to the absolute supremacy of a parliament three thousand miles across the Atlantic. The tory majority tried a large part of the whig plan without success. They tried conciliation and found it a failure. They repealed the stamp act and the paint, paper and glass act very early in the controversy. They made no attempt to enforce either act with troops and had scarcely any troops in the country at that time. But the colonists, instead of becoming more submissive, felt more conscious of their power and became more independent. In 1778 the tories offered to repeal practically all objectionable legislation and make a compromise that would be just short of absolute independence; but the American patriots rejected this offer as they had rejected all other attempts at conciliation that did not offer absolute independence.

If the whigs had been in power during the revolution there is no reason to suppose they would have been any more successful in conciliating the Americans than were the tories; and it is probable that they would not even have attempted to put their idealism into practice. In the Canadian rebellion of 1837 they were in power, but they suppressed that rebellion with a high hand, hanged and banished the ringleaders, did not withdraw troops, and did not rely on voluntary submission. Their idealism in the Revolution was mere minority eloquence. It is one thing to advocate an ideal theory when you are in a hopeless minority and not responsible for results, and quite another thing to put such a theory in force when you are in the majority and in power which you wish to retain.

The whig partisan policy is such a narrow point of view for writing history, that in order to maintain it and stay within it you must leave out of consideration and either conceal or ignore more than half the evidence and testimony of the eye witnesses and contemporary documents of the Revolution. You must write the Revolution merely as the English whigs saw it, or professed to see it for party purposes. You must omit large masses of evidence that have been found in both America and England. You must ignore the

testimony and arguments of the tories who from the point of view of impartial history are entitled to exactly the same consideration as witnesses as the whigs and patriots. You must ignore and vilify the testimony and arguments of the loyalists, who, if history is to be anything more than falsehood agreed upon, are entitled to exactly the same consideration as witnesses as the patriots, whigs and tories.

The whig point of view ignores completely the whole mass of evidence coming from the tories and the loyalists and does not accept all the evidence coming from the patriots. As the whigs were always trying to show that the patriot party in America did not really want independence, but would be content with a compromise, they accepted no evidence that did not accord with that view.

All through the Revolution the English whigs sneered at the loyalists, rejected all their statements, and were only a step behind the patriots in condemnation of them. It seems now a little contemptible, this merciless whig condemnation of the loyalists who were trying to save the same empire which the whigs professed to have a remedy for saving. At the close of the Revolution, when the treaty of peace was signed, a section of the whig party shifted their ground, took up the cause of the loyalists and attacked the ministry for making a treaty of peace which abandoned the loyalists to the mercy of the patriots.

If you confine yourself to the whig limitation, you must not only ignore the great mass of information about the loyalists, but you must also ignore the military strategy of the war, scarcely noticed in our histories, but, as Mr. Adams shows, almost as important and interesting as the campaigns of Napoleon.

The great controversy over General Howe's motives and military conduct fills the first three years of the evidence of the war appearing in pamphlets, letters and charges against him and finally, in the voluminous evidence of his trial or investigation by Parliament. This great mass of evidence about Howe, very familiar to the people of that time, but unnoticed in our histories, gives us entirely new views and ideas of the situation. Another controversy carried on with the greatest acrimony between Clinton and Lord Cornwallis and also unnoticed in our histories, gives us an entirely new understanding of the last three years of the war and its final issue.

Then there is much unused evidence about the actual position and services of France, not to mention Spain, and Holland. There are scores of old pamphlets which show the actual arguments exchanged between the two countries on the constitutional power of Parliament in the argumentative period of the contest 1764-1774. There is the evidence about the violation of the navigation and trade laws, and about the admiralty courts. All this evidence our standard histories fail to bring to light and explain.

They give us no adequate understanding of the dozen acts of Parliament which the patriot colonists wished repealed. They never explain the full meaning of that demand of the colonists that England should never keep soldiers in a colony in time of peace, except by the consent of the colony, that England should not change or amend a colonial charter except by the consent of the colony. They do not even explain, they hardly even notice the demand by the patriots that Parliament should have no authority in the colonies or in relation to them except to regulate ocean commerce. They do not explain what the colonists meant when they said that they were willing to be ruled by the king alone. They do not compare these demands with the modern British colonial system to see whether any of them have, in modern times, been accepted by England as proper methods of colonial government.

The most curious fact about the whig and *Annual Register* method of writing our history is that in the end the English tories accepted it as the safest and best way of describing the old controversy. Most of the evidence relating to the Revolution was a very serious matter for Englishmen to handle, no matter whether their political views were tory or whig. England still had colonies, expected to have more and to go on building up a great and obedient imperial empire. The whigs in their way believed in that empire as much as the tories and gladly accepted all the profits and advantages of it. Would it be wise for English writers, whether tory, whig or "impartial," to tell the English people that the American patriot party had from the beginning hated and detested what is to this day the foundation principle of the British empire, namely, the supremacy of Parliament as absolute and omnipotent in every colony

as it is in London; that they despised colonialism from the bottom of their hearts; that they believed it to be unmanly and degrading political slavery, and that the only definition of a colony that they accepted, was one which described a community like the old Greek colonies, sent out by a mother country with the intention that it should become absolutely independent, and that the mother country's only duty towards it would be to protect it from other nations and guarantee its independence.

That an English writer should describe the Revolution in this way and be compelled to admit that the American patriots had broken away from the British empire because they despised its foundation principle, was, and is, a great deal to expect of English nature or of human nature. Neither English Tories nor Whigs care to describe the Revolution as it occurred; and it is hardly fair to expect them to do it. Why should they deliberately excite their present colonies and their great and profitable East Indian empire to rebel and justify their rebellion. Is it not evidently much better to say with the Whigs that the American patriots dearly loved England and the British empire; that they were contented, dutiful and obedient colonists; that they were not only perfectly willing but anxious to remain in the empire and share its profits and glory of world wide conquest; that their leaving the empire was a mere accident brought about by the blindness, stupidity, and wickedness of a certain Tory ministry, or, as some later writers have put it, by the blindness, stupidity and self-will of the King, George III., who of himself, against the wishes of his ministry, parliament, and the English people, drove the Americans out of the empire, when they were perfectly willing to stay within it.

The first important history of the Revolution after Burke's annual summaries in the *Register*, was a four-volume work by John Andrews, LL.D., published in 1786. It followed the same lines as Burke's essays in the *Annual Register*, except that it gives much space to stating both sides of the arguments in Parliament, but in such a tiresome, verbose way, that it is almost unreadable. Andrews had no historic ability, no interpretative power; was a mere dull chronicler and summarizer. He cites no evidence or au-

thorities, and keeps on the safe side of mere ordinary dates and events. The great mass of actual evidence; the position, the doings, the arguments of the loyalists, the causes which led to the Revolution, the real conditions in America, the navigation and trade laws, the strategy of battles, the controversy over General Howe's conduct of the war, his trial before Parliament, the Clinton-Cornwallis controversy over the final strategy—these and a host of other actualities, one would never learn anything about from the pages of John Andrews, LL.D.

In 1787 a very ambitious and laborious account of the Revolution appeared by the Rev. William Gordon, an English whig, and Congregationalist minister, who had come out to Massachusetts early in the difficulties and remained with us all through the Revolution, interviewing generals and prominent men, visiting battlefields, examining private papers and public records and collecting notes and materials. When the war ended he returned to England and wrote his history.

He was not altogether liked in America. John Adams said he talked too much, and that his history in attempting to favor both sides was a failure. But he seems to have been trusted with important papers and he was unquestionably very painstaking and accurate. Many of the papers which he examined in manuscript, notably in the year 1775, have been published in the *American Archives* and confirm his statements. No one has given us a better detailed contemporary account of the Battles of Fort Mifflin and Red Bank. But he had no historic ability. He follows the *Annual Register* as a basis for a great part of his information, copying from it without changing the language, and announces in his preface that he has done so. He stays cautiously within the whig limits of safety already described. The remaining British colonies would not be stirred to rebellion by anything he says. But as a chronicler who lived amidst the events of the Revolution, his work is of some value as a piece of original partisan evidence.

In 1789 Dr. Ramsay of South Carolina, who had written about the Revolution, in his own State, brought out a general history of the Revolution, which strange to say, rejected in some respects the

guidance of the whigs and the *Annual Register* and in this respect stands alone. He seems to understand that the dispute between America and England was irreconcilable and could never have been settled by conciliation. He does not regard England's conduct toward the colonies as a mere mistake of a ministry, nor did he regard it as the affair of the king, but as a deliberate movement of an overwhelming majority in Parliament heartily supported by the aristocracy, the county gentry and the ruling classes, to consolidate the empire and bring the colonies under stricter regulations. He showed that under the old system the colonists had grown accustomed to semi-independence and now were bent on absolute independence. But his method of writing was so obscure and tedious and he gave himself so little room, that his book could never have much effect.

Any influence he might have had was soon overwhelmed and forgotten by the historical works of a writer of the highest order of popularity, and in that sense and influence the ablest historian we have ever produced. Prescott, Motley and Parkman are mere children when compared with him.

The truth is that Americans had no book about their great political events that was easy to read until 1800 when the Reverend Mason L. Weems came to their rescue with his "Life of Washington," followed by lives of Franklin and Marion. Parson Weems, as he was called, was, it is said, a preacher of large family and slender means, who had charge of a church in Virginia near Mount Vernon. To support his family he became a travelling book agent for Matthew Carey, of Philadelphia. He wrote books of his own and sold them in his wagon journeys through the country. He was ready with a sermon, an harangue, or a stump speech, wherever he could draw a crowd; and he would then recommend his wares and sell them from his wagon. He played well on the fiddle and was in demand at social gatherings and dances. He must have been an entertaining fellow in his way and I should like to have seen him on some of his tours through the south.

For a generation and more, his books, especially his "Life of Washington," had an enormous sale and went through over forty

editions. They were necessarily histories of the revolution. His ideas on that event reached every corner of the country and every class of life; and the publishers tell me his "Life of Washington" still sells. Reckless in statement, indifferent to facts and research, his books are full of popular heroism, religion and morality, which you at first call trash and cant and then, finding it extremely entertaining, you declare with a laugh, as you lay down the book, what a clever rogue.

It is impossible to refrain from quoting from him. He is a most delightful mixture of the Scriptures, Homer, Virgil and the back woods. Everything rages and storms, slashes and tears. At the passage of the stamp act "the passion of the people flew up 500 degrees above blood heat." In battle Americans and English plunge their bayonets into one another's breasts and "fall forward together faint, shrieking in death and mingling their smoking blood." Here is his description of Morgan at the last battle of Saratoga.

"The face of Morgan was like the full moon in a stormy night when she looks down red and fiery on the raging deep, amidst foundering wrecks and cries of drowning seamen; while his voice like thunder on the hills was heard loud shouting his cavalry to the charge."

"Far-famed Brittanica," Weems says, "was sitting alone and tearful on her Western cliff, while, with downcast looks, her faithful lion lay roaring at her feet." And we must have one more from his description of the Battle of the Cowpens.

"As when a mammoth suddenly dashes in among a thousand buffaloes, feeding at large on the vast plains of Missouri; all at once the innumerable herd, with wildly rolling eyes and hideous bellowings, break forth into flight, while close at their heels the roaring monster follows. Earth trembles as they fly. Such was the noise in the chase of Tarleton, when the swords of Washington's cavalry pursued his troops from the famous fields of the Cowpens."

It is in vain that the historians, the exhaustive investigators, the learned, and the accurate rail at him or ignore him. He is inimitable. He will live forever. He captured the American people. He was the first to catch their ear. He said exactly what they wanted to hear. He has been read a hundred times more than all the other historians and biographers of the Revolution put together.

He fastened his methods so firmly upon the country that the learned historians must, in their own dull and lifeless way, conform as far as possible to his ideas or they will be neither read nor tolerated.

Out of the social, genial, card-playing, fox-hunting Washington, Weems manufactured the sanctimonious wooden image, the Sunday school lay figure, which Washington still remains for most of us, in spite of all the learned efforts of Owen Wister, Senator Lodge and Paul Leicester Ford. Weems was a myth-maker of the highest rank and skill and the greatest practical success. Of the Revolution itself he made a Homeric and Biblical combat of giants, titans and mammoths against the unfathomable corruption and wickedness of about a dozen dragons and fiends calling themselves King and Ministry in England.

He goes back wholly to the whigs and the *Annual Register*. The people of England, everyone on that blessed island, except the dozen ministerial fiends, were, he assures us, a noble, kindly, gentle race. He knew them well; he had lived among them when he studied theology; and they did not make war on the Americans. They would not have thought of such a thing; they disapproved of the war. As for the American colonists, though giants and mammoths when aroused, they were also a gentle people, most loving and obedient to the mother country, anxious to remain with her, had not war been cruelly made upon them.

And why then was cruel war made upon them? Simply, says Parson Weems, because "the king wanted money for his hungry relations and the ministers stakes for their gaming tables or diamond necklaces for their mistresses."

There it is in its crudest form, the ministerial explanation of the Revolution, the most popular, short, easy and practical explanation of the great event that could be devised. It reveals nothing about the real issue at stake between the two countries; nothing about the question of the supremacy of Parliament or the other great principles involved. But it pleased vast numbers of people because as expressed by Weems, they could grasp it instantly; it appealed to their suspicions of what the effete monarchies across the Atlantic really were. Expressed in different language with a few political and

more refined ideas substituted for the diamond necklaces and hungry relations, it pleased the half loyalist element which still remained in the country, and it pleased a certain class among the patriots who wanted to be able to admire England, her literature, her laws, her social customs, the charming lives of her country gentry, the hedge rows and green fields, and the fashion of London. They could admire and love all these things, have social pleasures with distinguished Englishmen, talk about the Anglo-Saxon race, its glories and conquests, and yet remain true Americans, because the Revolution had been a mere ministerial war, a ministerial accident, unconnected with the rest of England and such an accident could never happen again.

We might dispose of all the subsequent histories of the Revolution by simply saying that they followed along in this short and easy method. Even Chief Justice Marshall in his *Life of Washington* published in 1804, though once or twice disposed to break away, trots along in the same old rut.

In 1809 quite a popular history of the Revolution appeared in French, which went through twenty editions in Europe. It was written by Charles Botta of Northern Italy, who had been a surgeon in the French army, and was appointed by Napoleon on the commission to govern the Italian republic he established. It was made up, the author himself tells us, from the *Annual Register*, other histories, the parliamentary debates and pamphlets. But it is all *Annual Register* and so dull that a modern reader has difficulty in getting through a single chapter. The American translation went through ten editions. Adams and Jefferson, who were still alive, praised it highly. The popularity of such a tedious compilation is hard to understand, unless it was that our people were pleased because it was a French and Italian defence of our Revolution and institutions.

Hildreth's "History of the United States," published in 1849, devoted parts of the third and fourth volumes to the Revolution. It was a carefully written work, in much better style than its predecessors, and is still pleasant to read, but was a conventional chronicle within the established lines.

It was quickly followed by two other histories, one by Lord

Mahon and one by George Bancroft. Lord Mahon, afterwards Lord Stanhope, was a man of distinction in English politics and literature, founder of the National Portrait Gallery and closely associated with the amendment of the English copyright law and the Historical Manuscripts Commission. His "History of England" from 1713 to 1783 came out a volume at a time, between the years 1836 and 1853. In the last three of the seven volumes it touched upon the Revolution. It was the first account of that great event written in a style of any literary merit; and Lord Mahon's style possessed great merit. Without the slightest attempt at the eloquence or rhetoric supposed by some to be necessary for history, he relies on mere clearness and aptness of words to convey the ideas of a very cultivated and intelligent mind. Every page of it is interesting and is likely to remain so for all time. As a history of England it is full of information, especially of the prominent characters of the time; but as an account of our Revolution, it touches only the surface. He goes no deeper than to say that the loss of the colonies was a mere accidental piece of foolishness on the part of the ministry; and having started with that position his pleasing narrative keeps within the lines of safety.

In 1852 Bancroft's "History of the United States" reached the Revolutionary period. It had been coming out a volume at a time since 1832. Bancroft was of Massachusetts origin and studied in Germany where, perhaps, he over-educated and over-Germanized himself. He traveled extensively, met distinguished men, became Secretary of the Navy and founded the Naval Academy at Annapolis. He was also minister from the United States to England and to Germany. It was a splendid experience and one would naturally expect from him something of broader gauge than his very cramped, and bitter partisan account of the Revolution.

It was the most violently partisan and timorously defensive history of the Revolution that had appeared. It was most cautiously written, with the greatest dread of the slightest admission, and with intense straining to make out a perfect case. Entirely devoid of candor, his fierce assaults on the character of Governor Hutchinson, his assignment to him of every contemptible motive, his sweep-

ing condemnation and ignoring of the loyalists, and his omission of everything that did not support the English whig theory, have made his work more violently and narrowly one-sided than the partisan pamphlets of the period of which he was writing.

His early volumes dealing with the discovery of the continent and the colonial period were much better than those relating to the Revolution. He restored to remembrance many important points in colonial history which, for want of an adequate account had been forgotten. But in the Revolution he became merely a scholarly Weems, carrying to exaggeration the worst features of Weems and Botta.

In his treatment of the Writs of Assistance, he declaims against the decision of the Massachusetts court allowing them, as contrary to the law and the constitution and cowardly subserviency to the British Government. But the decision was perfectly sound law, as Judge Gray of the Supreme Court shows in his admirable investigation of the subject; and until we recognize it as sound and investigate from that point of view, we shall never get any farther in the history of the Revolution than mere demagoguism and declamation. In his volumes on the colonial period, Bancroft made in footnotes a number of citations to the original evidence, and some when he reached the Revolution. But those for the Revolution were very inadequate; and in subsequent editions, for his work had a wide circulation, the citations for the Revolutionary part grew less and less until in the end they disappear almost altogether, and he gives no references for his innumerable quotations. His researches for material both in this country and in Europe are described by his friends as the most remarkable ever made. Documents and sources of information closed to all others were, we are assured, open to him. But strange to say, we see no result of this in his published work. Nor can any subsequent investigator profit by his labors; the wondrous and mysterious sources of information remain mysterious; and many of his opinions are difficult to support with the evidence which investigators are able to find.

This practice of not giving the evidence in footnote citations has been characteristic of all our histories and is, indeed, quite necessary

and proper when the essential principle is that the greater part of the original evidence must be ignored. The habit of citation once begun, might be carried too far.

Fiske, whose volumes on the Revolution have been published since the Civil War, makes no citations of the original evidence. Possibly he has forestalled criticism in this respect by the statement in the preface to his illustrated edition, that his work is a mere historical sketch. But it is two volumes containing some seven hundred pages, confident and positive in tone. For the sources of his material he refers us to Winsor's "Hand Book of the Revolution," and the notes of the "Narrative and Critical History of America." But he might just as well have referred us to the card catalogues of the public libraries. Such a general reference means nothing; and a very large part of the material contained in Winsor's "Hand Book" and in the "Narrative and Critical History" is made up of commentaries on the Revolution, which are becoming more and more numerous as time goes on. We have not yet learned in this country to distinguish sharply between the original evidence and the subsequent commentaries. Our histories are usually written from the commentaries which are numerous, more accessible, more full of suggestion of all sorts, and easier to write from and understand than the original evidence.

Fiske's account of the Revolution was, however, superior to all previous histories because it contains practically all that Bancroft and the rest contain much better expressed. It would be difficult to improve on Fiske's style of writing for clearness, beauty and readableness. Bancroft attempted the old-fashioned rhetorical style, which, in his hands, ran to turgidity and bombast. Oratorical dignity, the style that has been so often applied with success to Greek and Roman history, is probably inadequate, in any hands, to the economical, legal and constitutional, the prosaic, plebeian and democratic struggle, which took place in America. Lord Mahon's style was far better than the classic oratorical; and Fiske's is the best of all.

Fiske was an extreme admirer of Gladstone, the English liberal party, its predecessor the whig party, and the whole system of the British empire. At almost every step he brings in this admiration

for England; "her glorious records of a thousand years," and her dominion "on which the sun shall never set." If Gladstone had been alive in 1776 he and Washington would have settled the whole difficulty amicably, the English speaking race would not have been divided, and the United States would in some wonderfully sweet way have remained British colonies and part of the British empire, the great civilizer of the world. That is the keynote of his history; and it is all written within that limitation. No one has so glorified and enlarged the old whig and *Annual Register* idea.

He limits himself and narrows his point of view still more by assigning the obstinacy of the king and his love of personal government as the cause of all the difficulty. The king deceived and forced the ministry, Parliament and the English people, and kept them deceived and forced during eleven years of argument and eight years of war.

This one-man explanation of great political events is a cheap and easy historical device of very wide application. It is very dramatic and from a literary point of view, very telling and interesting. Fiske varies it and makes it more dramatic by assuring us that the person who put the wickedness into the head of George III. was Charles Townshend.

That is a very pretty and interesting touch, to have Mephistophiles whispering in the ear of the one man. Botta, who also had the one-man idea, said that the devil who did the whispering was Lord Bute. And, indeed, the devil might be varied indefinitely, because there were so many people suggesting those ideas at that time. The editor of the *Boston Gazette* may have been the devil; for Townshend's main idea can be found in the pages of that journal long before Townshend promulgated it. If Mr. Fiske and his followers will admit that there were many million devils comprising the majority of the Parliament and people of England together with the loyalists in America all whispering and some talking very loud for the encouragement of George III., the one-man theory will become comparatively harmless.

If modern comprehensive investigation aided by improved libraries and collections has established anything, it is that the prominent

or great individuals, while undoubtedly valuable, are more apt to be the results and outcome of political movements than the causes of them. The Revolution was a world movement forced on by the thoughts of millions of people. Its beginnings extend far back of 1764, and George III. merely swam in the current. In the face of all the accumulated evidence of its workings, to assign the responsibility for it to one man may do well enough for eulogistic biography or oratory; but is hardly admissible in history, if history is to be anything more serious than the latest novel.

Lecky's "History of England in the Eighteenth Century" of course touches slightly on our Revolution and here we certainly have a man of strong intellect dealing with the subject. As might be expected he kicks over the traces and refuses to be bound by the ridiculous limitations of the school of Bancroft and Fiske. We find him stating the point of view of the loyalists, describing their large numbers and the factious turmoil of the times with that refreshing boldness, impartiality and instinctive love of truth which have made the author of the "History of Rationalism in Europe" one of the heroes of civilization and a terror to ecclesiastical humbugs. He cites his authorities in footnotes like a real historian; he deals largely with the original authorities; and one can learn more about those authorities in his brief account than from all previous histories of the Revolution put together. Unfortunately, however, he deals with our Revolution only incidentally, touching on it and coming back to it again farther on. To have gone into it thoroughly would have thrown his work out of proportion. His sound method, therefore, does not have chance and space enough to bring to the surface all that should be brought.

In recent years another history of the Revolution, not yet completed, but very voluminous, by Sir George Otto Trevelyan, has been appearing in England, a volume at a time. Mr. Trevelyan is remembered for his admirable "Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay," published nearly forty years ago and for his subsequent life of admiration of Charles James Fox, the brilliant whig orator in Parliament at the time of our Revolution. The life of Fox treated only of that statesman's early years; and in his preface to the history Mr. Treve-

lyan explains that he finds he can write the rest of Fox's life only by writing a history of the American Revolution about which Fox so often spoke in Parliament.

It hardly accords with an American's idea of the dignity of that event to see it regarded as mere illustrative material for the biography of a very reckless and insolvent gambler, who, however able he may have been as a minority speaker in Parliament, and however interesting he may still be to all of us, was by no means the most effective statesman England has produced. Our sense of proportion is somewhat outraged by the exaltation of the gambler through six volumes of the American Revolution, with more to come.

At the same time it must be confessed that from a literary point of view, and in Mr. Trevelyan's skilful hands, the sacrifice of history to an overestimate of a picturesque character keeps his readers interested and amused. The volumes are full of anecdote, reminiscence, political and literary gossip of the intellectual sort; and the best parts of the work are the descriptions of English life and conditions in that age. The diffuseness of the style seems to an American less suitable to history than Fiske's matchless brevity and ease, and it is far inferior in intellect, keenness and humor to the style of Mr. Charles Francis Adams. But Mr. Trevelyan is a delightful master of telling idioms, and clever phrasing, which have placed him where he is in English literature.

He is a distinguished member of the English liberal party and this with his natural sympathy for that party's predecessors, the old whigs and for his picturesque gambler, combined with the necessity for not saying anything to impair modern British control of colonies, forces his book into the most narrow form of the Weems ministerial explanation.

As an attack upon the tory ministry of that period, nothing probably will ever equal the accumulated force, the massing of details, the sweeping condemnation and the charm of language of Mr. Trevelyan's work. The unfortunate ministry is overwhelmed and buried under a mass of disapprobation that exceeds in weight and volume all that Fox and all that all the other whig orators ever said against them. Every fact, every inference, every delicate insinuation that

lapse of time, historical perspective and the labor of years can bring together, is heaped upon them. Their depravity, malignity, and stupidity are unspeakable, especially when contrasted with the enlightened virtue and perfection of Fox and the whigs. It is perfectly obvious that the American colonies were lost merely by the peculiar circumstances of the cruelty and absurdity of this extraordinary ministry, the like of which in infamy has never been known before or since. That is all there is in the American Revolution; and it is also quite evident that if the plans of Fox and the whigs had been carried out those affectionate and long-suffering colonists who dearly loved the British empire would have remained in it in some ideal and friendly relation, which is not definitely described.

Mr. Trevelyan is not impressed by the difference between the original contemporary evidence and the subsequent innumerable commentaries or secondary authorities. He cites one as readily as the other; and his investigations into the original evidence appear to have been very moderate. He ignores the greater part of it. The secondary authorities suit him better, because they support the ministerial explanation. Except for the descriptions of English life and manners, his work is largely made up from the commentators. It is melancholy that a man of so much talent should surrender himself body and soul to this old stupidity of forever re-writing the Revolution from the accumulating opinions of commentators, which move farther and farther away from the evidence; and now Mr. Trevelyan's six or a dozen volumes must be thrown into the mass to be re-hashed for another progress away from the original evidence.

Within the last year or so, however, there has appeared an English history of the Revolution by the Rev. Mr. Belcher, which shows a most decided familiarity with the original evidence and an equally decided determination to jump out of the old whig and *Annual Register* rut. He is the first Englishman since Lecky's time that has been willing to admit, that there is a great mass of loyalist evidence. He gives his book an entirely correct title and calls it "The First American Civil War." He is rather an interesting and clever phrase-maker, after the manner that has been popular in England for some

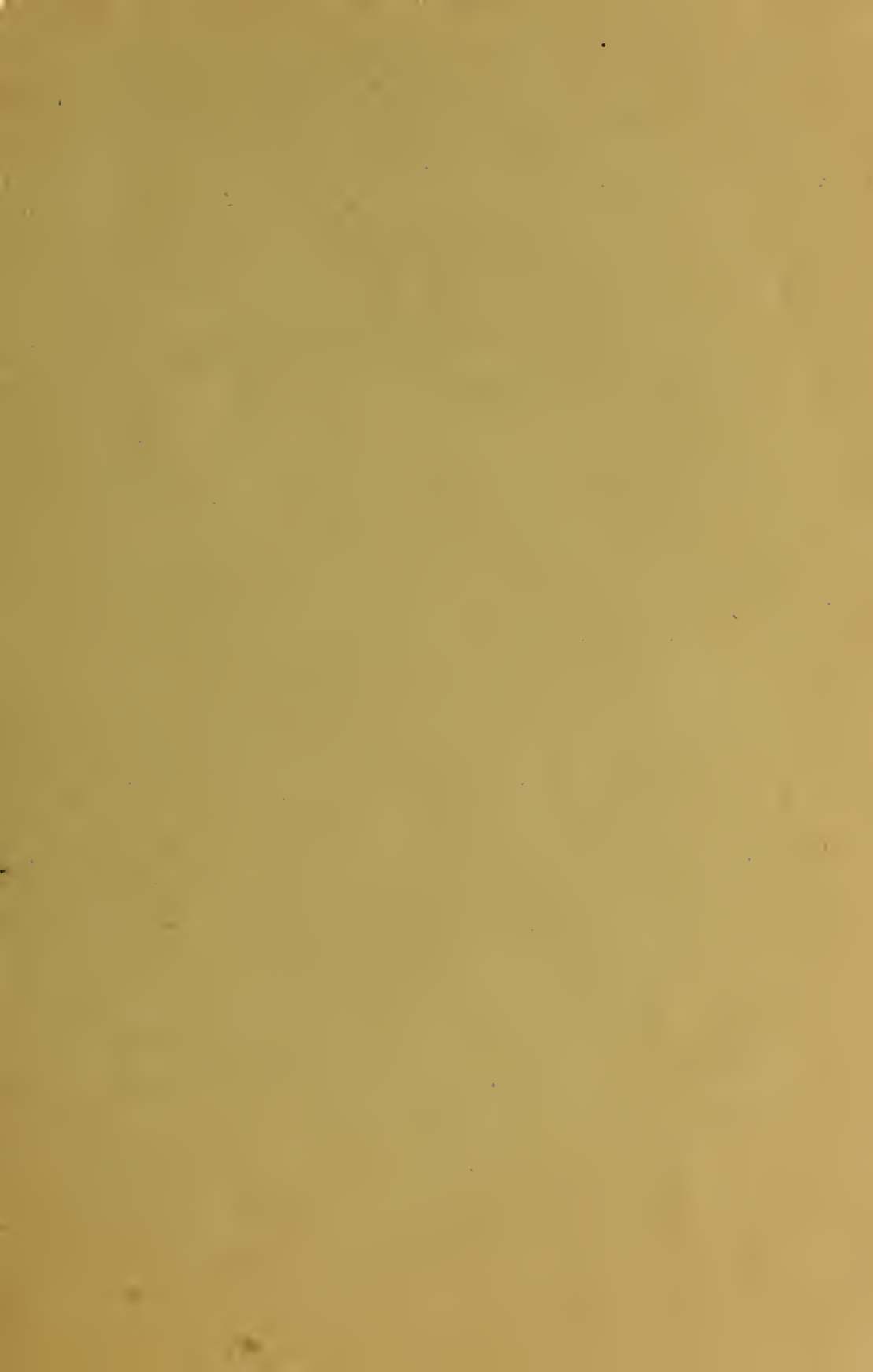
time. But he runs on too much into mere political gossip, unrelated details, and his book, in consequence, lacks logical sequence; an inevitable defect, some will say, in a man of religion. But no matter about that, and no matter about his taking a very John Bull point of view, and safeguarding John's face and colonial possessions. He has jumped out of the old rut. He is in the original evidence; and for that heaven be praised even if he only flounders in it.

Since the above paragraph was written my attention has been called to an article in *Blackwood's Magazine* (March, 1912, p. 409), attacking with very considerable severity and ridicule the absurdity of continuing to write the history of the American Revolution from the narrowness of the old whig point of view. It is mere "senseless panegyric," the writer says. As a piece of history "it belongs to the dark ages;" it represents the views of the desperate whigs which will never again be expressed by a serious historian.

Why be so scared and timorous about the original evidence, and why conceal it. After the first plunge and shock of the cold water is over, you will enjoy it. The real Revolution is more useful and interesting than the make believe one. The actual factions, divisions, mistakes, atrocities, if you please, are far more useful to know about than the pretense that there were none. The real patriots who hated colonialism and alien rule in any form and who were determined to break from the empire no matter how well it governed them, are more worthy of admiration than those supposed "affectionate colonists," who, we are assured, if they had been a little more coddled by England, would have kept America in the empire to this day.

There has recently been some discussion in the newspapers on the hopelessness of all efforts to make good plays or even good novels out of the scenes of our struggle for independence. Why should our Revolution, it is asked, be so totally barren in dramatic incident and dramatic use and some other revolutions so rich in that use. May it not be because our Revolution has been so steadily and persistently written away from the actual occurrences, that novelists and play writers when they search for material find a scholastic, academic revolution that never happened and that is barren of all the traits of human nature.

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